

Three and a half months on from the beginning of the “Yellow Vests” movement in France, it is possible to draw both short- and long-term conclusions, and analyse its consequences, in the context of France and other western democracies.

The French Situation

Movement in the short-term, counter-intuitively, is likely to help President Emmanuel Macron at the upcoming European Parliament elections (set for May 23-26). Traditionally these elections do not attract much attention and are often characterised by relatively low levels of participation. This time, it is possible they will provide an opportunity for the growing number of French people who are exasperated by the weekly disturbances of the yellow vests to express their discontent by voting for Macron’s listed candidates. Opinion polls suggest that mobilisation will be higher among educated French people, who are more likely to vote for Macron. The list supporting him should be first, followed by the Le Pen (Rassemblement National) list.

There are however longer-term concerns. Even if Macron has recovered from abysmally low levels of support (now at a level comparable to or slightly above those reached at this phase of their mandate by Chirac, Sarkozy, and Hollande), his base of support is fragile. This support base could weaken further if the concrete measures following the “grand débat national” disappoint, which is likely considering the contradictory demands it has exposed (more public services, fewer taxes, etc.).

The more structural concern is that the success of Macron has been built on the collapse of traditional parties: it is a good thing, insofar as it allows for a renewal of the political debate, which has for too long been stifled by outdated debates. However, it is also a reminder that Macron’s election was paradoxically another example of the populist wave. In the process, the French political landscape has been devastated. On the right, the conservative movement (Les Républicains) is a shadow of its former self. It has made the strategic mistake of trying to kowtow to the Yellow Vests, losing the law and order vote without building support among the Yellow Vests. Part of its electorate has gone to Le Pen and part to Macron.

While on the left, the socialist party, led by a mediocre uncharismatic leader, is at its lowest level in decades (6 per cent). Part of its electorate has gone to Melenchon, a French version of Britain’s Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, whose support from voters hovers around 8 per cent. Part has also gone to the ecologists and to Macron (although Macron’s support comes more from the traditional right than the traditional left). That leaves Macron with only one significant party to challenge him, the Rassemblement National of Le Pen. The optimists will bet that this will facilitate his re-election: indeed, if the election was held now, and Le Pen was the challenger, opinion polls suggest that Macron would win by 55 to 45. A significant but narrower margin of victory compared to the last election when he won by 66 to 34. A worst-case scenario cannot exclude the possibility that the continuation of the present trend might eventually lead to a victory of Le Pen.

The most disturbing aspect of the Yellow Vests movement is how it has liberated a violence in thoughts, words and actions that are symptomatic of a social crisis. While any society has its share of hooligans, and even if the rise in antisemitic acts, coming from Salafists (in the case of Finkielkraut) as well as from a tiny minority from the extreme right, it is concerning that they have not met with a truly unanimous condemnation by the rest of the population. A

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significant part of the French people seems to have a growing indifference - if not tolerance - for violence, and there is an increasing sense of brutality in society. There are multiple examples of that evolution: from the systematic destruction of speed radars that may have led to a sizable increase in road fatalities, to an opinion poll that reveals the majority of French people are against the return of children of Jihadists from Syria or Iraq.

The broader lessons of the French crisis

The French crisis was triggered by an increase in the tax on diesel, the impact of which is greater on the rural population, who is much more dependent on private cars. The reaction was particularly strong in France because gas taxes are already high, though it points to a broader issue as well: the transition to a low-carbon economy will not be painless, and one can expect more political crises as the pressure increases to address the challenge of climate change in a decisive way. Governments will have to develop policies that deal with the transition in a comprehensive way, including its social aspects.

The socio-economic dimension of the crisis is a factor in France, as in the United States or the United Kingdom; the most virulent anti-establishment people are not the poorest but the lower middle-class who have lost hope to move up and are afraid of moving down. One should probably expect more of these lower-middle-class flash movements, which do not bring together structured interest groups (farmers, industrial workers, etc.) as in traditional politics, but rather specific strata of society. The rhetoric of elite versus victims reflects this new type of polarisation.

The socio-economic dimension of the crisis should however not be overstated. The choice of the Yellow Vest as the defining feature of the movement is a brilliant publicity stunt (every car owner in France owns a yellow vest). It is also indicative of a key dimension of the movement: the demand for visibility; no better way to satisfy it than to don a jacket which is designed to be just that. In advanced democracies, traditional representation through elected representatives is no longer sufficient. In an age in which you can instantaneously “like” a post and evaluate a service or a product, electing representatives is often perceived as unreliable, slow and outdated. The appetite for direct democracy - with its well-identified risks - is indicative of the crisis of representation. It hurts traditional political parties and is unlikely to go away unless, or until, other modes of representation are invented; they should be designed to complement rather than substitute elected representatives, who will remain a critical part of the deliberative process at the heart of democracy. The success of the “Grand Débat National,” launched by Macron as a response to the Yellow Vests, with more than one million comments, points to a pent-up demand of people to be heard. The fact that the movement has so far rejected those who wanted to turn it into a political force is further confirmation that such flash movements are not primarily about power and different policies.

In that regard, the role of social media has been critical. Constantly taking pictures, filming demonstrations, documenting police violence and mobilising through Facebook groups have been essential features. These forums have influenced the traditional media that have tried to emulate the instant reporting of social media and contributed to the extensive coverage of the Yellow Vests, long after the mobilisation had peaked. The negative impact of social media has been massive: the proliferation of fake news, self-intoxication, violence of images and language encouraging violence of actions. Rather than opening spaces for debate, Twitter and Facebook have helped strengthen self-referential constituencies immersed in their own propaganda. Virtual mobs are created on the internet, which can move to the physical space once they have reached sufficient size. This is a phenomenon likely to be replicated in other countries.

Lastly, the active role of RT-France - seen by Yellow Vests as one of the most reliable media outlets - and of Russian trolls, confirm that Russia has a comprehensive and well thought-

Dragoman

through policy of destabilisation of western democracies. The presence in some demonstrations of mercenaries who were active in Donetsk is another indication. Exploiting an adversary's fragilities is much cheaper than building one's own strength.



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